



Weekend Observances Mark Solemn Holiday for Vets

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Uniforms extricated from the depths of closets were brushed down and pressed. Buglers blew the mournful notes of "Taps" through frozen lips. And the flags, blindingly bright in the November sun, were held as stiffly aloft by octogenarian World War II veterans as they were by teenage Boy Scouts.

Amid the stately mourning for those who died in past wars and underlying the painful and private memories of all the men and women who served, the rawness of a new grief emerged at Sunday's Veterans Day observances -- that of ongoing hostilities in Iraq, where at least 389 United States service members have died, including 251 after President George W. Bush declared the end to major combat operations.

"Let's put it this way: It hurts a lot more this year," said Pat Cassetta, 76, of Uniondale, a World War II veteran and member of the First Marine Division Association. "Especially for us old veterans, because we don't want to see those young boys being targets like they are."

Nevertheless, Cassetta said Sunday, two days before Veterans Day is officially observed, "What we started we've got to finish ... I hate it, what's happening. But we can't pull out. When you pull out, you admit defeat, and then you have to do it all over again. Let's finish it."

In East Meadow, veterans groups appreciated Nassau County's \$200,000 refurbishing of the monument at Veteran's Plaza in Eisenhower Park and vowed to do more for veterans who find themselves disabled, homeless, or addicted to drugs or alcohol.

"We are as diverse as America itself," said Edward Aulman, president of the United Veterans Organization of Nassau County. "We have different politics, different religions, ethnic backgrounds and races. What we share together is a common experience ... Those terrible and those wonderful days. Those life-changing and proud days."

In Huntington, town officials said the unveiling of a Vietnam veterans memorial was a way to give those who served in that war the honor and appreciation they may not have received on their return.

"We have the right to agree with policies; we have the right to disagree with policies; we even have the right to remain silent," said Rep. Steve Israel (D-Huntington). "But never, ever, ever do we have the right to shortchange our troops."

Asking the crowd of more than 500 to applaud Vietnam veterans present at the ceremony, Frank Libutti, a retired Marine lieutenant general and now under secretary of homeland

security, told the veterans, "Stand tall and be proud." Libutti, a Huntington native, helped unveil the black stone monument, inscribed with the names of 855 Huntington residents who served in Vietnam.

It was an overwhelming moment for Ken Thompson, 58, of Huntington Station, who said he lost his best friend among many other fellow soldiers in Vietnam. "I think about it every day," Thompson said. "I've been out of Vietnam 30 years and I still have nightmares. Really, what's on my mind is all my buddies who didn't come home ... I often ask myself why I was so lucky."

George Lang, 56, of Seaford, a Congressional Medal of Honor recipient who was honored Sunday with the Distinguished Service to Veterans Award of Nassau County, had a plea for those assembled in East Meadow.

"Before your head hits the pillow," he told them, "say a prayer for all our service men and women who are in harm's way. And may they come home safe to be with their families."

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